



“Blessed?”
Matthew 5:1-12
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
January 30, 2011

Celebrities have replaced authentic heroes. Celebrities enjoy wealth, admiration and notoriety. They appear on life-sized posters in teenagers’ bedrooms, dot the covers of popular magazines and appear in ads on the Internet. Celebrities show us what is hip and what is passé. They tell us what we should eat, drink, drive and wear, and many people dutifully obey.

Celebrities owe their lofty status “more to advertising sponsors and media exposure than to noble qualities of character.” Yet, when high school students in Brooklyn were asked what they would most like to be, two-thirds answered: “A celebrity.”¹

As I was reflecting on how adults as much as young people have gone gaga over celebrities such as Lady Gaga, I read the words of Jesus. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek...” Does Jesus not understand that to attract followers and boost your numbers, you need star status? Surely he would attract more media attention if he taught instead, “Blessed are the wealthy, blessed are the beautiful, blessed are the mighty!”

Today’s passage comes from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He has gathered followers, begun his healing ministry and now he sits down with a crowd to share his wisdom. When Jesus speaks, he is not teaching middle class citizens who are frustrated with a few inconveniences of life. He is addressing his fellow Jews who must endure the occupation of Roman troops and a political and economic system that forces them into poverty. These are not people struggling to eek out a decent living. They are straining to survive one more day.

These people live in fear beneath a regime that has no qualms about executing anyone who steps out of line. The Romans view such killings as opportunities to remind those whose land they occupy of what happens to those who resist. Threat of death is the essence of Pax Romana. The Roman Peace was not an ideal in which weapons of war were beaten into agricultural tools and people were free to respectfully disagree with the government. Rather, the Romans equated peace with order and obedience. Roman troops maintained peace by crushing all opposition. Today we wait to see what approach will be implemented in Egypt.

In what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to people who are struggling to survive foreign domination and believe that their desperation is a clear sign that God is punishing them. It is to people who live in poverty, who live in fear, who believe that their plight is punishment from the Almighty, that Jesus says, “Blessed are you.”

The words of Jesus must have been so startling that many thought they had misheard him. I imagine someone shouting, "What? Can you repeat that?" Instead of issuing a sharp reprimand; instead of saying, "You are getting what you deserve," Jesus says, "Blessed are you."

This morning's lectionary reading contains the opening words of Jesus' sermon known as the Beatitudes. He pronounces nine blessings, which function in two ways. First, they declare God's favor on people who suffer. And, second, they illustrate those actions that are in harmony with divine desires. They serve as both a word of comfort and a word of challenge.

New Testament scholar Warren Carter points out that the beatitudes consist of two groups. The first four "are bound together by an alliteration of the Greek letter π." Unfortunately, when the words are translated into English, the alliteration is lost. A rough equivalent would be "Blessed are the poor, the plaintive, the powerless and those who pine for righteousness. Carter says, "these four beatitudes describe not personal qualities but oppressive situations of distress which are honored because they will be reversed in God's kingdom. This reversal is now under way in Jesus' ministry but is not yet complete."²

When Jesus tells the people that they are blessed, he is not saying that they should plaster on a smile and whistle a tune. He is saying that despite their afflictions, they can be confident that God cares deeply for them, and one day their fortunes will be reversed. It is an assurance of comfort. It is a message of encouragement. It is a promise of hope.

The first blessing, according to Matthew's gospel, is "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Some of you know that the Beatitudes also appear in Luke's gospel, but in a slightly different form. According to Matthew, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*," but according to Luke, Jesus said simply, "Blessed are the poor."

Well-off Christians generally prefer Matthew's version. Many are not keen on the idea that God would side with people who are poor. All of us seek to relate the words of Jesus directly to ourselves and while we may not know poverty, we know what it is to have depressed spirits or an anemic spiritual life.

The first Christians likely saw little difference between Matthew and Luke's versions. Jesus was undoubtedly speaking to people who were desperately poor and whose spirits were crushed by the tyranny under which they labored.

In saying they were blessed, Jesus was saying, "Do not think you deserve this. Do not think this is what God wants for you. God loves you and you can find comfort in God. Although your current situation is dire, your afflictions will not last forever; God will vindicate you in the future.

Most of us might admit that such a blessing is not totally satisfactory. We want God to eliminate poverty, pain and injustice. When do we want it? Now! However, in a world where people are free to make choices, we must live with the consequences of good and bad decisions.

Jesus told the crowd they were blessed because their broken spirits would one day be healed. Such a blessing was empowering, because it assured them that God was on their side and opposed to the forces of injustice.

Jesus also said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Jesus was not raising suffering to a virtue. He was refuting the popular notion of his day that those who suffer are being punished by God. Jesus said exactly the opposite. He said God will comfort you who mourn. Your sorrow is not unnoticed. You are not alone; God is with you."

Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Does God want us to shrivel in the face of injustice and faint in the face of evil? Hardly! Jesus addressed people who possessed miniscule power and little control of their destiny. Jesus was saying that although they

were victims of a dark force that wielded mighty power, in the end, brute force will not win the day. Although they were currently under the fist of a ruthless power, in God's kingdom, the roles will be reversed.

The fourth beatitude is "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Jesus said righteousness, not self-righteousness. He was not urging people to believe that they were better than others. He was blessing those for whom justice was denied and access to vital resources was limited. He was blessing those who had little reason to remain hopeful, yet they had not given up in despair. They continued to yearn for the world God envisions – a world where people look out for each other, where generosity flows like a river, where virtue succeeds and remains on top, and where justice thrives in every community.

Beatitudes five through nine represent a second set. They move away from circumstances people experience to actions God challenges us to take.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful." The world knows too much cruelty, intolerance and harshness. Christ counsels us to counter meanness with mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." If our hearts are pure we gain a clarity of vision that draws us closer to God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Strife and violence are tearing our world apart. The current divide in our own country seems fueled by people who become so convinced of their own virtue and the vice of their opponents that they have no desire for reconciliation. They only want to impose their way on others. The path of Christ requires the arduous effort of finding common ground, of seeing our opponent's point of view, of admitting we might be wrong, of trying to convert enemies into friends.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." People who take up a just cause discover that that the opposition can be fierce. Someone is benefitting from the injustice and they will fight to keep their advantage. The easy path is to say that I am but one small voice with little power to implement change. Jesus blesses those who are persecuted for having the tenacity to stand for what is right.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." If you strive to live as Christ lived, you will be at odds with the values of our culture and may become a target.

Charles Marsh, a professor at the University of Virginia, tells of a pivotal moment in the life of the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One day in 1956, when the boycott was floundering and white opposition was intensifying, King came home exhausted and discouraged. As he was climbing into bed, the telephone rang. It was a death threat. It was not the first, but this one was chilling. King went downstairs, brewed a pot of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table.

Feeling that things were falling apart despite having giving his best effort, King prayed. He cried. He prayed. And something happened. King said that night he heard the voice of Christ consoling him and telling him not to be afraid. After that, King accepted the fact that this struggle was going to be the heart of his ministry. He tackled segregation laws with more vigor than before, and soon embraced peaceful, non-violent tactics.

A Quaker peace activist said that when he visited King in early 1956, King's house was filled with an arsenal of weapons. But after that kitchen epiphany, King gave up the guns saying they had to go if he was going to follow God's agenda.³

No one would confuse the beatitudes with nine tips to celebrity status. They will not make you wealthy or powerful. Unless you understand **wealth** as riches that cannot be bought and **power** as the courage and unwavering determination to conquer darkness with light.

To be blessed, is to live with an unquenchable hope that in the long arc of history justice will prevail because love is more powerful than hate and peace more coveted than strife.⁴ So blessed are you who live a Christ-like life of compassion because even though it may attract derision and persecution, in the end the ways of God will triumph.

NOTES

1. Ian Harris, "Honest to God: Celebrities and Heroes," in the *Otago Daily Times*.
2. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), p.131.
3. Charles Marsh, "MLK's Theology Recovered: 'Kitchen Epiphany' Was Presence of Jesus," in *Vital Theology*, February 1, 2005, p.4.
4. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice."